DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 995 SO 022 858

AUTHOR Tuttle, William M., Jr.
TITLE Children in Wartime: The Second World War in the Lives of America's Home-Front Children.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (August, 1988). For a related paper, see SO 022 859.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Development; *Children; Family (Sociological Unit); Family Life; Historiography; Social Change; Social History; Social Science Research; *Sociology; *United States History; War; *World War II

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the impact of World War II on the lives of U.S. home-front children--that is, the boys and girls born between 1933 and 1945 who were children during the war and were still preadolescents when the war ended. The paper proceeds by discussing, first, the topical approach to the subject used in this essay; second, the ways in which sociology has guided the research and analysis it contains; and third, by suggesting collaborative efforts that could be undertaken by interdisciplinary research groups of social historians and social scientists. Finally, it is suggested that in studying U.S. children on the Second World War homefront, the historian should explore topics that were not only important at the time, but have had significant developmental consequences throughout the lives of these children. The most important topics appear to be: wartime migration of families and children; family formation: the sharp increase in marriages and births between 1940 and 1945; children's health during wartime; war separation and the rearrangement of family roles; children's homefront participation in wartime; war's psychological and emotional effects; nonwhite children's experiences during the war; war's effect on child-rearing advice and practices; the scope and effect of wartime governmental policies regarding children; and readjustments for family members due to fathers returning from military service and mothers from wartime jobs. (DB)

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ED357995

"Children in Wartime: The Second World War in the Lives of America's Home-Front Children"

(To be presented at the American Sociological Association annual meeting, August 1988)

by

William M. Tuttle, Jr.
Profesor of History
University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas 66045

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When Viviana Zelizer and I talked a year ago about my participation on this panel on the sociology of childhood, I, of course, began to question what I as a historian could bring to such a gathering. To try to answer this question, I first wrote a 50-page paper on "Children in Wartime: The Second World War in the Lives of America's Home-Front Children." This paper, which I like very much, elucidates the various ways in which the war had an impact on America's home-front children and their development. But since it would take me a couple of hours to read this paper, I have decided to speak this morning--in the fifteen minutes allotted to me--first, on the topical approach which I have taken to this subject and, second, on the ways in which sociology has guided my research and analysis and the ways in which has helped to define the topics which I need to confront in this study. Thirdly, I hope to suggest collaborative efforts that could be undertaken by interdisciplinary research groups of social historians and social scientists.

But let me begin my paper with a quotation in order to provide context, for isn't that, after all, what most social scientists look to the historical discipline to provide?

"America may be on the way toward creating another lost generation," moaned Alfred Toombs, a writer in the Woman's Home

Companion, in April 1944. "We run the risk by paying too little attention to the welfare of our war babies--the helpless creatures being born into a topsy-turvy world." Toombs was not alone in expressing the fear that the United States might win the war against the Axis Powers, but lose the important battle for the American children's physical and emotional health and welfare.[1]

Lay people and politicians joined the experts in worrying that wartime social changes were demoralizing the family, thus diminishing children's prospects for happiness and individual fulfillment. People all along the political spectrum agreed that the family's deterioration was evident in the upsurge of juvenile delinquency during the war. Sharing this unease were governmental leaders as disparate as J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Katharine F. Lenroot, chief of the Children's Bureau. "Millions of Americans are now fighting or moving toward the battle fronts," wrote Hoover in a 1943 article entitled "Wild Children." But with fathers at war and mothers in the bomber plants and shipyards, the girls and boys were often left unattended. And according to Hoover, the "neglected youngster" had a dismal future, including the possibility of "stumbling into the dreaded maze of delinquency and disease, of reformatory and prison, or, if they are not

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[1] Toombs, "War Babies," Woman's Home Companion, 71 (April 1944), 32. See also Vance Packard, "Give the War Babies a Break," American Magazine, 139 (May 1945), 24-25, 112-14.

apprehended, of maiming and plundering." The nation's leaders "must realize," he concluded, "as should every American, that the boys and girls are our most priceless national asset, that their preservation is as important as any objective in this war."[2]

What, in fact, were the events and processes, the losses and gains, the dreams and fears, that affected American children's lives during the Second World War? Probably the best way to answer this question is to examine American families' home-front experiences during these years, since the social changes unleashed by war were crucial to families' fortunes. For one thing, wartime prosperity stimulated both marriage and baby booms. But the war also separated many fathers from their families, and it stimulated women's employment, thus contributing to the ranks of latchkey children.

Tamara K. Hareven, founder of the Journal of Family History, has written that scholars in family history begin with the

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[2] Hoover, "Wild Children," American Magazine, 136 (July 1943), 40, 105; Hoover, "There Will Be a Postwar Crime Wave Unless--," The Rotarian, 66 (April 1945), 12-14; James Gilbert, A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 24-41. See Lenroot's testimony in U.S. Senate, 78th Cong., 1st Sess., Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, Wartime Health and Education (Washington: GPO, 1943), Part 1, 105; U.S. House of Representatives, 78th Cong., 1st Sess., Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, Department of Labor-Federal Security Agency Appropriation Bill for 1944 (Washington: GPO, 1943), 234-36; and U.S. House of Representatives, 78th Cong., 2nd Sess., Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, Department of Labor-Federal Security Agency Appropriation Bill for 1945 (Washington: GPO, 1944), 302-7.

assumption that "the key to an understanding of the interaction between personal development and social change lies in the family." From this perspective, the study of "Children in Wartime" is, first of all, a study of "Families in Wartime." James H. S. Bossard, a sociologist of the family, recognized this in a 1944 article: "So comprehensive and fundamental are the changes wrought by war, and so closely is the family interrelated with the larger society, that there is perhaps no aspect of family life unaffected by war." This was particularly true during the Second World War, which brought such immense economic, social, and cultural change to the United States that historians have called it a watershed in American history.[3]

"The world of the child is the world of the family," wrote the sociologists Andrew G. Truxall and Francis E. Merrill in 1947. But it was not the family alone that mediated the influence of wartime on children's lives. As the girls and boys began to grow up and move into settings outside of the family, other institutions and people became increasingly important--namely, the neighborhood, school, church, peers, popular culture,

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[3] Hareven, "The History of the Family as an Interdisciplinary Field," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 11 (Autumn 1971), 400; Bossard, "Family Backgrounds of Wartime Adolescents," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 236 (November 1944), 33; chapter 28: "The Second World War at Home and Abroad," in Mary Beth Norton et al., A People and a Nation: A History of the United States (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, second ed., 1986), 790-815; Gerald D. Nash, The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

and the workplace. Thus the historian, in assessing influences upon childhood, must adopt an age-specific perspective on childhood development. And since social historians and developmentalists in the social sciences alike endorse the need to study the institutions mediating between society and the developing child, this suggests many possibilities for interdisciplinary research.[4]

The sociogist Glen H. Elder, Jr., has suggested conceptual approaches to such collaboration. "The imprint of history," Elder has written, "is one of the most neglected facts in [human] development." "Lives are shaped by the settings in which they are lived and by the timing of encounters with historical forces, whether depression or prosperity, peace or war." In addition to the family and kin system, the neighborhood, and the school, other obviously important variables include those of gender, race, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, religion, and region. In varying configurations, these elements function to shape children's lives, and, of course, considering the seemingly endless configurations possible, they do so differentially. By the same token, the timing of children's encounters with historical change is a crucial factor in explaining individual development. Using this perspective, scholars can begin to

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[4] Truxall and Merrill, The Family in American Culture (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1947), 427.

explain why children's development during the joblessness of the Great Depression was distinguishable from that experienced by America's home-front children during the full employment of the Second World War, or by the "baby boomers" during the generally prosperous 1950's and 1960's.[5]

The life course is another example of "the timing of encounters with historical forces," only in this case the timing refers to the child's age at the time of the encounter. As defined by Elder, the life course refers to "pathways through the age differentiated life span, to social patterns in the timing, duration, spacing, and order of events; the timing of an event may be as consequential for life experience as whether the event occurs and the degree or type of change." Was the child in infancy when a historical event occurred, or was she in early childhood, play age, or school age? An example from the Second World War is father absence, an experience that doubtless had a differential impact depending upon whether the child was one, three, five, or ten at the time her or his father embarked for miltary service. Children's other encounters with change on the wartime home front--for example, resulting from a family's migration, a mother's employment, or a child's exposure to the

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[5] Elder, "Social History and Life Experience," in Dorothy Eichorn et al., eds., Present and Past in Middle Life (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 3; Elder, "The Timing of Lives," (forthcoming article), 1; Elder and Avshalom Caspi, "Human Development and Social Change: An Emerging Perspective on the Life Couse" (forthcoming in Caspi et al., eds., Persons in Context [Cambridge University Press], 2-7).

widespread and intense mobilization propaganda that filled the airways and movie screens--similarly had a variable effect depending upon the child's age and state of development at the time. Age thus was instrumental in determining the lifespan consequences which these historical events and personal experiences had as the child entered into and negotiated subsequent stages of the life course.[6]

The cohort on which this paper focuses is America's children during the Second World War--that is, the boys and girls born between 1933 and 1945 who were children during the war and were still preadolescents when the war ended. According to the sociologist Norman B. Ryder, "A cohort may be defined as the aggregate of individuals (within some population definition) who experienced the same event within the same time interval." This was true of these children. (A generation, on the other hand, is usually thought of as comprising a longer period of about 30

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[6] Elder, "Families and Lives: Some Developments in Life-Course Studies" (forthcoming in Journal of Family History [1987]); Elder, "Family History and the Life Course," in Tamara K. Hareven, ed., Transitions: The Family and the Life Course in Historical Perspective (New York: Academic Press, 1978), 21; Elder, "Perspectives on the Life Course," in Elder, ed., Life Course Dynamics: Trajectories and Transitions, 1968-1980 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23-49; Elder and Caspi, "Human Development and Social Change," 2-3.

For an appreciation of historians' use of Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages for the study of children, see John Demos, "Developmental Perspectives on the History of Childhood," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 11 (Autumn 1971), 315-27; David Hunt, Parents and Children in History: The Psychology of Family Life in Early Modern France (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 11-25, 189-96.

years.) To complicate the matter, two distinct "intragroup cohorts" were born during the years from 1933 to 1945. Between 1933 and 1939 there was a dearth of babies; between 1940 and 1945 a surfeit of newborn. The first cohort was born into an economy--and mentality--of scarcity; the second emerged during a period of economic boom and victory. Considering the contrast between childhood in the 1930's and childhood in the 1940's, America's home-front children seem to be split not only into two intragroup cohorts, but also between two generations.[7]

In studying American children on the Second World War home front, the historian should explore topics that were not only imortant at the time, but have had significant developmental consequences throughout the lives of the home-front children.

I believe that the most important of these topics are:

1. wartime migration of families and children

2. family formation: the sharp increase in marriages and births between 1940 and 1945

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[7] Ryder, "The Cohort As a Concept in the Study of Social Change," American Sociological Review, 30 (December 1965), 845; Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," in Paul Kecskemeti, ed., Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 276-322; Glen H. Elder, Jr., Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 15-17; Elder and Caspi, "Human Development and Social Change," 5-7, 50.

3. children's health during wartime, featuring dramatic decreases in infant mortality due to the combined effects of governmental policies and wartime prosperity

4. war separations and the rearrangement of family roles:

a) father absence

b) working mothers, child-care shortages, and "latchkey children"

c) reliance on extended families, especially grandparents

d) "war-born children" arriving while their fathers were overseas

5. children's home-front participation in wartime:

a) participation of the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and other children in school-related scrap collection drives, campaigns to sell war stamps and bonds, etc.

b) education and children's political socialization, affecting ideology, morale, values, and attitudes during the war and afterwards during the life course

c) similarly, effects on attitudes and values during this period of war-intensified popular culture, particularly:

1) films and newsreels

2) radio

3) animated cartoons and comic books

4) advertising

6. war's psychological and emotional effects--for example, fears of air raids and of death and dying; increased anxiety stemming from a strong sense of danger accompanied by feelings of defenselessness; etc.

7. nonwhite childrens' different experiences during the Second World War: for example, Japanese-American children interned in war relocation camps, black children caught in the 1943 race riots, Hispanic migratory farmworkers' children, American Indian children who suffered the nation's worst poverty

8. war's effect on child-rearing advice and, presumably, on child-rearing practices

9. the scope and effect of wartime governmental policies regarding children:

a) Emergency Maternal and Infant Care

b) Servicemen's Dependents Allowances

c) Lanham Act to aid "war-boom communities" by providing funds for schools, child-care facilities, etc.

10. difficult readjustments for family members due to fathers returning from military service and mothers from wartime jobs

I have already consumed my allotted time. But I cannot end my paper without expressing my gratitude to the social scientists who did their research in the 1930's into the 1950s, and who studied childhood influences from a variety of perspectives--a self-proclaimed "urban anthroplogist like W. Lloyd Warner, culture-and-personality anthopologists such as Florence and Clyde Kluckhohn, psychologists like Alison W. Davis and Robert J. Havighurst, and a host of sociologists, some of whose names I have mentioned. But to whose names I would add those of John Clausen, Melvin Cohn, Reuben Hill, Mirra Komarovsky, and many others. Collectively, they have re-sensitized me to the significance of both social class--however defined--and ethnicity. And they have demonstrated the influence of class and ethnicity, first, on child rearing in the United States during the era of the Second World War[8], and, second on childhood

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[8] See William M. Tuttle, Jr., "Class, Culture and Society in America: Child Rearing during the Second World War Era" (paper delivered at the Organization of American Historians, March

relations as the child matures and enters the outside world.

I am happy to have had the opportunity to exchange ideas with a group of sociologists. Thank you.

1988).